

On the Road to Paris, Texas: An Interview with Artist Leticia Cardoso

by LESLIE MOODY CASTRO

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NEVER COULD HAVE IMAGINED THAT I would learn so much about life and love in the months of October and November 2009. When Leticia Cardoso arrived in Austin from Brazil as part of the Mapping Exchange program, a col-

laboration between the Blanton Museum of Art, the College of Fine Arts, the Brazil Center of LLILAS, and the Iberê Camargo Residency program in Brazil, she had a very specific idea in mind. Inspired by Wim Wenders's film *Paris, Texas*, Cardoso arrived full of questions that she had no intention of answering. She instead consistently sought moments in which to lose herself in the Texas landscape, to remain lost in translation, and to rediscover the beauty of self-realization in foreign terrain. For her residency, Cardoso proposed to travel to Paris, Texas, document the trip, and create a video as a final product. What developed, however, was much more intimate and emotional than any of us could have expected.

In her two months in Austin, Cardoso became my emotional soul mate. She and I were at opposite ends of the very same trajectory, and we came to form an incredible friendship characterized by extraordinary adventures. In November, I accompanied Leticia and Andre França of the Brazil Center on the road to visit the real Paris, Texas, in an attempt to help Cardoso discover her muse. In a mix of English, Spanish, and Portuguese, comprehensible communication proved difficult but not impossible, and for the three of us this simply added to the sense of adventure we had set out on. Using a series of devices (three cell phones and four cameras), we succeeded in finishing Leticia's proposed video project. During the ten-hour drive, we talked of love, travel, and language, and how (according to Cardoso) true love requires no translation. In an absurd twist of fate, not one of us could provide a conclusive definition of love. But, as it turns out, Paris really is the city of love, and as we drove back to Austin we all knew that we had fallen.

Working with Leticia Cardoso has been one of the most rewarding artistic moments of my career. This interview is a mere summary of the conversations that I was privileged to have, and it is simply the tip of the iceberg that is the art and philosophy of Cardoso.

LMC: Who or what are your artistic influences?

LC: At the moment, Wim Wenders, Bill Viola, Louise Bourgeois, Jessica Stockholder, Mariana Abramovic, Clarice Lispector, Mathew Barney, Pedro MC, Fernando Lindote, Fabiana Wielewicz, Lucila Vilela, Cynthia Pimenta, Elisa Noronha, Zé Lacerda, Janaína Tschape, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Andy Warhol, love, noise, silence, Texas, the landscape, and the desert.

LMC: What was the moment that you decided you were an artist?

LC: I am still waiting for this moment ... what does it mean to be an artist today? I often wonder if my blog is a work of art or if it is just like every other travel blog. My guarantee is the Iberê Camargo scholarship I have received to be in Austin, as well as the people who believe in my work. When I send one project or proposal to a gallery and it is accepted, then I am sure that I am an artist. When I don't have this tangible answer, I instead have the passion for art and the desire to be alive through my work. I learned the difference between "work" and "job" while I was in Austin.

However, I remember a more tangible moment when I decided to make art my career. I was born in Criciúma, in the south of Brazil, where I lived until I was 15 years old. We had no museums in Criciúma, and I didn't visit a museum until much later. When I was 9 years old, I studied art in a small house with lots of fantasies and images. My teachers took me to the Bienal de São Paulo, and when I returned I was sick ... it was too much, but I loved it, and in that moment I didn't understand the border between art and play, and I'm not sure that I

know the difference even now. But my father always believed in traveling, and I learned that you have to change your location to see museums in your life from a different point of view. So, when I was 15 years old I decided to live in Oxford for one month. One day I saw the *Sunflowers* by Van Gogh and I felt something strange. When I was on the bus from London returning to Oxford, I could see a difference in color, and I realized that something had changed. When I returned to Brazil, I told my parents that I wanted to study art.

LMC: Your residency program at the Blanton Museum has been inspired by the Wim Wenders's film Paris, Texas. How and why did that film inspire you to travel across the state of Texas? What were you expecting to find in the landscape?

LC: I don't know what love is, and the film *Paris, Texas* makes me ask more questions about the border between images and words. Initially, I didn't believe in what Wim Wenders was saying with the film, and I asked, "So, Paris is a small town in Texas?" I had to see it to believe it, and now that I've seen it I have learned that Parisians are so kind [they paid for our breakfast and showed us Jesus wearing cowboy boots!]. But mainly, I went to Paris because of the trust I felt with Leslie and Andre França who drove me, because I wasn't ready to drive in the United States, and the only way to get to Paris is by car.

LMC: Please tell me what Paris, Texas the movie means for you, and what Paris, Texas, the town means?

LC: What is Paris? Is it the center of the arts in the world? I have never been to Paris, France, I have never been to the Louvre, so does that mean I'm not an artist? Paris, Texas, is an image that changed my whole existence. We are always changing, and it's hard because at times I just want to hold onto some world and just be safe. I feel that we are always lost and this is good too, it's like the story of the tower of Babel, being lost in a lot of languages.

LMC: Can you describe the feelings you had when you arrived in Paris, Texas?

LC: No, I can't, sorry ... maybe the images could show us a lot of things about my feelings.



Artist Leticia Cardoso

LMC: How does your residency project fit into the trajectory of your body of work? Where do you see yourself going now that you have accomplished the great feat of getting to Paris?

LC: We live in an amazing world of television, Internet, and movies. People can travel a lot, see different places and people, and oftentimes we see these things only with our eyes. However, I want to know more. I believe that some changes just happen inside the body, when we are dislocated, for instance, and when we change our orientation, and watch the world in another situation, like being a stranger. It's like watching the world from another point of view. Sometimes it's hard to be a stranger, but really, I think that in some ways we are always strangers, some may not like to be a stranger, and some do. Being a stranger in a place can be dangerous, you can get lost in another culture.

LMC: You have spoken of "silence" and "noise"; could you please define these and how they are evidenced in your work?

LC: Noise happens when you say something and those listening don't understand. It can happen in the same culture and in the same language, these things just happen all the time, every day and in every place.

Silence can be a lot of things and a lot of words, it's a mystery, we never really know what it is. It can be the choice to be alive, like

in the *ditadura* [the dictatorship in Brazil]. Sometimes I talk a lot because I can't understand the silence between people, sometimes I choose silence just because I feel like I am a stranger and I can't understand what people are talking about. At times, it's good to be alone, in silence, with my images, and my memories, just listening with my eyes. For me, traveling alone through the desert is simply looking at the landscape, waiting and waiting for the images and memories evoked by the landscape. I believe that it becomes possible to hear your own heart, and for me the heart is the only road map I really believe in.

LMC: Your work is interrelated and follows a clear trajectory where one video piece/photo informs the next step that you take in conceiving another project. What is your thought process in moving from one project to the next?

LC: I don't know, the images just happen. Sometimes, however, we are blind and we have to work a lot to make money, but for me images are food, without them I am dead. So I continue breathing, and exchanging with the world, and the work just happens at some point of my day or in my dreams.

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